



The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

February 2001

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- ◆ We have a zero tolerance policy toward alcohol and drug abuse. However, it is not against the policy to have an alcoholic drink at lunch in a restaurant. Couldn't someone with a high tolerance drink heavily, but show no signs of intoxication on the job?

If your policy does not prohibit consumption of alcohol during the workday, such as at a restaurant during lunch, an employee with a high tolerance might have a blood alcohol level over a prescribed limit and not appear intoxicated. The intoxication might go unnoticed because of the absence of behaviors that might trigger suspicion. Some organizations, such as schools and hospitals, may prohibit personnel from using alcohol during the workday, even while on a lunch break. With such an abstinence policy, the smell of alcohol alone might be used to justify a reasonable suspicion test. Presumably your policy commits the organization to act decisively in response to substance-abusing employees, but intoxication is not always evident. This is why supervisor referrals to an EAP solely for performance issues may identify and salvage more alcoholic employees than testing.

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- ◆ I consulted with the EA professional. I decided that a disciplinary action against my employee would be appropriate. Should I tell the employee that the EAP supports the disciplinary action?

Although you received management consultation services and subsequently decided to take a disciplinary action, the EAP does not play a role in endorsing or disapproving of your decision. Violating this principle would erode the organization's trust for the EAP's objective, problem-solving role. This is an important point in EAP theory. Endorsing your decision would align the EAP with the disciplinary action. Opposing your decision would likewise undermine your ability to manage effectively. EAPs must maintain a neutral role so they can attract both non-supervisory and supervisory employees. You should own your decision entirely, and not reference the EAP. To do otherwise will alter the perception of the EAP's neutrality and abuse the EAP's credibility. This could damage the EAP and its value, making it less attractive and less effective.

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- ◆ I have postponed addressing my employee's attitude problem for many years. I admit that not confronting her has made the problem worse. Is it possible to confront her and expect changes after such a long period of time?

Although it will be difficult to step in suddenly to intervene with your employee's behavior, it is possible. Begin by considering exactly what behaviors you want changed. Write them down and assign a degree of importance to each. A bad attitude can mean many things, so clearly define what behaviors constitute a bad attitude. Just as important, define their cost to the organization. Do they cause morale problems? Lost productivity? Work errors? Hold a corrective interview and discuss the changes you want. Provide the rationale for change, but be candid with your employee if she asks why you are suddenly requiring her to change. Explain how you've postponed confronting her, but that your priorities have now made the changes in her conduct paramount. Do not ignore any future behavior problems, or you will reinforce her problematic behavior. Be sure to praise her for any progress you see.

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- ◆ I admit I get irate and yell at my employees when they don't do what I want, question my authority, or don't perform properly. I am very frustrated with myself. What can I do to gain control over my emotional response to my employees?

Some belief or condition contributes to your emotional response. Getting emotional may be effective, but it's not practical because the intimidation keeps your employees from acting to build a more effective relationship with you. Examine your beliefs for clues that could explain your reaction. Ask yourself, "What must I believe in order to act this way?" Do you feel unsupported by management? Do you doubt your skills and abilities? A health care problem could explain the emotional basis of your reaction. The EAP can help you examine any of these possibilities and more. Try keeping a journal of your responses. On each occasion when you react irately, record what stimulated your response. Record improvements in controlling your reaction with each subsequent event. And, record what you will do on the next occasion to alter the behavior.

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- ◆ I believe in the value of EAPs, but not so much in supervisor referrals. If someone can't perform, I'll replace him. If an employee visits the EAP, great, but that's their decision. Why isn't this a common sense approach to employee problems?

Organizations that establish EAPs recognize that not every personal problem that interferes with job performance will be amenable to the self-diagnosis and the self-motivation you expect of employees. Indeed, employees with certain medical conditions may slowly deteriorate in their ability to perform over many years, but have no clue as to what contributes to their work problems. In such instances, blaming others and denial are natural ways of dealing with reality. These employees could be your best performers if their personal problems were identified and effectively treated. Many such personal problems are very treatable. The simple step of making a supervisor referral based upon performance problems is all it may take. Helping your organization preserve its resources, and reducing the headaches of turnover, are clear reasons for using your EAP as a management tool.

Notes:

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